

'He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan'.

In those far-off, more innocent days

(before things rather caught up with him) –

Kevin Spacey played the lead character in *The Usual Suspects* –

which is one of those films that won't let you go.

Perhaps the most famous line is when Verbal Kint

(played by Kevin Spacey) says

'the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist' –

which (like most of the rest of the film)

raises the whole question of what's real and what isn't.

What *is* real?

What *actually* matters?

What *should we* commit ourselves to?

What ought we – *to take seriously?*

They're the most important questions *anyone* can ask –

because they take us right to the heart of what it is to be human.

Which is why they've been asked by people –

across all cultures, right back to the Greeks and even before.

But not (of course!) by most of the people, most of the time –

and probably not by some of the people – any of the time.

Questions like that demand a level of engagement with the human condition –

more intense and serious than many are able or willing to do.

But given who he was – and what he became –

there's nothing *remotely* surprising that Jesus –

took such questions very much to heart.

'And the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness ... and he was with the wild beasts'.

Right at the start of his ministry, Jesus has to ask himself –

who he *really is* – and what his goals really are.

Questions that we fail to ask – at our peril.

Being honest with (and about) ourselves – is maybe the hardest thing in the world.

There's always the temptation to fudge it.

To pretend.

To assign to ourselves motives that are a whole lot nobler and nicer and higher –
than we really deserve.

It's how ambitious clergy are able to convince themselves –
that they're *really* looking for the best way they can serve God –
rather than accepting that actually

they'd *very much like* the status –

that comes with being an archdeacon or a bishop.

It's often the case – that the lure of money and power
(and the trappings that go with all that sort of stuff) –
are most keenly felt by those with the lowest sense of self-esteem.

And the only way they can feel good about themselves –

(which is what we all need – to get us through the day)

is by having control over others.

Either through religious or political authority.

Or through the use of financial resources which mean they can –
live in expensive houses, or go on expensive holidays, or drive expensive cars.

All things to protect them from feeling ordinary, vulnerable and frail –
and inescapably mortal.

Just like poor people, in fact.

Because the reality –

is that whatever our differences –

of education or intelligence or looks or wealth or whatever –

we're all in it together.

We're all weak and fragile creatures, easily wounded, easily discouraged.

We all need love and encouragement if we're to blossom.

And if deprived of those things –

we can become bitter and aggressive and thoroughly unpleasant.

The story of Jesus going into the wilderness is usually understood –

as him going off into some remote, desert region.

Maybe he did – but maybe he didn't.

He certainly didn't *have* to.

What he needed (what we *all* need)

was (somehow, somewhere) –

to be alone with his thoughts.

To reflect and think and wrestle with all the possibilities.

But of course (in the story) –

he wasn't alone.

We're told –

'he was with the wild beasts'.

And the usual assumption is that these were creatures –

like the leopards, bears and jackals who lived out there.

But (once again) –

that might not have been the case.

Maybe they were different creatures, different wild animals –

invisible ones, in fact –

that lived inside him?

Because what he was doing ‘in the desert’

(wherever and whatever that might have been)

was coming to terms with who (and what) he really was.

And a key part of that

(if he was even *remotely* human) –

would have been learning to accept those parts of himself

that weren’t usually on show.

We’ll never know what happened to him out there 2000 years ago –

but it’s something all of us need to do here and now (if we’ve not done so already).

To come to some sort of accommodation –

with those parts of ourselves that we try to keep hidden

(maybe *especially* from ourselves).

Because unless we can do *that* –

(unless we can accept ourselves –

broken bits, sad bits, angry bits, and all –

for who and how and what we really are) –

we’ll *never* be able to accept others –

or have compassion for their weaknesses.

It’s not surprising that some of those who are loudest in their condemnation –

of the failings of others

(especially with regard with what are rather quaintly called ‘sins of the flesh’) –

have subsequently been found to be in precisely the same boat..

Unless we can accept the wild beasts within us –
we're going to see the ones outside us as a permanent threat to our self-identity –
to that image we've carefully-crafted over the years.

Those hurt bits.

Those neglected bits.

Those shameful bits.

Those bits of our past that have left scars.

Those bits that are still raw.

They're not going to go away –

so they need dealing with.

That's what the wilderness experience, the desert experience –
is all about.

A place of isolation (maybe even of *desolation*).

A place where we try to come to terms with ourselves..

A place of struggle, a place of temptation –

the greatest being the temptation to take the easy way out.

To shy away from the things that are painful and difficult.

Sin is all about falling short of what (and who) we could be.

Of failing to do what it takes to be real.

And that's the hardest thing in the world.

We're *so* easily distracted – because we're always *looking* to be distracted.

The people who are admired in our society –

are those who've 'got on'.

The ever-busy, high-achievers and go-getters.

The captains of industry or cabinet ministers or leaders of the armed forces.

But the only reason most of them *have* been able to ‘get on’ –
is by being so focussed on their ambition –
that they’ve got neither the time nor the energy to stand back –
and ask themselves the really serious, existential-type questions.
And perhaps the thing that lies behind all that drive, all that energy –
is a fear of what (or who) they might find they actually amount to –
were they ever to stop.

Maybe (to paraphrase Verbal Kint)

*the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world
they didn’t need to bother their pretty little heads about stuff like that.*

And he did so by distracting their attention so successfully –
from anything even remotely serious –
they didn’t realise they were missing anything at all.

The key thing was:

To keep them out of the desert at all costs.

Keep them away from the wilderness.

Keep them *so* busy and *so* occupied –

that they were *never* left to their own devices –

when they might have had a chance to reflect and to question.

It wasn’t actually that hard –

because who in their right minds would choose to go into the desert –

and be alone with their thoughts and doubts and fears?

But to be on the safe side –

he invented the sort of religion –

that offers all the answers.

So people just had to sign up for it –
keep their heads down –
and think (and believe) what they were told.
It was a great wheeze –
and worked better than he could ever have imagined.
His great fear was that some people might get involved –
in the other kind of religion.
The sort that would allow them no escape, no easy answers –
and no ducking of the difficult issues.
But fortunately few ever came across such stuff –
because the loudest and most insistent voices –
tended to drown out anything like that.
And the result was that pretty well anyone with more than half a brain –
would run a mile –
rather than get involved with the Church on such terms.
This is why *we've* got to do a whole lot better –
and dig a whole lot deeper –
into *what it means to be real*.
Which is (to put it another way) –
what it means to be fully human.
And it was because he saw the Church
as conspiring to prevent people being fully alive
that the German philosopher Nietzsche railed against Christians –
saying '*it is not your sin, but your moderation that cries to heaven;
your very meanness in sinning cries to heaven!*' (Zarathustra p43)

Anglicanism is very much like this –
in that it so often provides simply a polite endorsement and underpinning –
of the status quo.
No real cutting edge, no real challenge.
Just a genteel backdrop to life, making few demands –
and causing even fewer waves.
But however tempting it may be to treat Christianity –
as a kind of spiritual musak –
it's *such* a long way short of what Jesus was about –
that it needs to be resisted with everything we've got.
And just as we can imagine Jesus wrestling with the devil in the desert –
as he weighed up all the possibilities that were open to him –
so *we* need to turn our backs on anything and everything that gets in the way –
of *us* taking life in general (and Christianity in particular)
with the seriousness they deserve.
It's worth remembering that in post-Renaissance art –
Satan increasingly symbolised human beauty, intelligence and pride –
(with the earlier images of him as a horrible, frightening creature –
being replaced by something far more ambiguous).
And of course it's much more realistic
to think of him as a smooth, infinitely plausible operator –
because evil usually comes with a nice face, and a polite and respectable manner.
It's precisely because it *is* so attractive to us –
that we often fail to recognise it as in any way reprehensible at all –
which is why it's so dangerous – and so difficult to resist.

Of course – if Jesus really *did* go out into the desert –
it would have been terribly cold at night.
He'd have needed to light a fire.
And once he'd got it going, you can imagine him sitting up close to it –
shivering away, until it started to give out a decent amount of heat.
Imagine the scene –
and imagine also how attractive that heat would have been –
for the other inhabitants of the desert.
The leopards, bears, jackals, and others.
Imagine them – creeping out of the shadows to enjoy the warmth with him.
Imagine them all – gathered peacefully together in the light of the fire.
It didn't happen (of course) – and it couldn't ever happen (of course).
But that doesn't actually matter.
It's a story, an imaginative creation –
a way of expressing something that can't be expressed in other ways.
This is why every religion (as opposed to bog-standard historical accounts) –
is full of stories.
Every single religion *has* stories.
And indeed – every single religion is stories.
It's the different stories – that make them different religions.
The ethical foundations are pretty much the same.
But they're expressed in their own particular ways.
And the story we tell at this time of year (of course) –
is of Jesus going into the wilderness.
Which we take as a call – for us to go into the wilderness as well.

Lent is a time of reflection.

A time, as the Ash Wednesday liturgy puts it –

‘of self-examination and repentance’.

A time, not (primarily) for giving up things we like –

(to be gratefully resumed at Easter) –

but the heaviest of hints by the Church –

that we ought to take religion a bit more seriously than we usually do.

Maybe (in fact) *to go out into the desert – and to light a fire.*

To feel its warmth – and see who comes to join us.

Not just other people – although they’re obviously more than welcome.

But those things – that lurk inside us.

Those hurt and angry and sad and damaged wild animals –

who need acknowledging and taking seriously.

Because once they’ve been accepted – there’s at least a chance they can be tamed.

All the time they’re just raging around inside – they’re causing mayhem.

Either because they could break out at any time.

Or because they can pollute and distort the way we respond to others.

This is why we need the desert – and why our faith depends on it as well.

Because (at their best) – churches are:

Places where there’s enough trust – for people to risk being really open.

Places where even wild beasts are welcomed – and embraced.

Places where full-fat reality is engaged with – rather than kept at arms’ length.

It’s not what the Devil had in mind, of course – all those years ago.

But he’s had things his own way – for far too long.

So let’s light that fire.